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ABSTRACT

To prepare a course on "Communication Skills for the Community College Teacher" a literature search and a focus group interview on the topic of effective community college lecturing was carried out. The literature search revealed shortcomings in the literature on lecturing, which tends to be oriented to secondary school or four-year college teaching, is often written by people with no exposure to the field of communication, and often ignores the issue of different lecturing techniques for different disciplines. Results of the focus group interview included a consensus that community college instructors face a unique teaching situation and that little has been done to prepare them for that challenge. The experience of teaching "Communication Skills for the Community College Teacher" proved the usefulness of such a course, as the course material was brand new to the students, most of whom were community college teachers. There is a significant need for research on community college teaching, which could be promoted by partnerships between four-year college researchers and community college faculty. (SR)

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LECTURING IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CLASSROOM: RESEARCH AND REACTIONS

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based on a team-teaching experience in
The Doctor of Arts
in Community College Teaching Program
at
The Center for Community College Education
George Mason University

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BACKGROUND

In order to understand the context for this paper, it is necessary to describe the setting in which the authors sought to discover the characteristics of effective lecturing in the community college classroom.

In 1988, George Mason University created the Center for Community College Education. Its first task was the development of a unique Doctorate of Arts in Community College Teaching designed to meet the special needs of prospective and practicing community college teachers seeking an advanced degree. Community college teachers often find that existing doctoral programs are of little use or interest. A traditional discipline-based Ph.D. is so specialized that the graduates of such programs find little applicability to their profession as community college instructors. Community college doctorates offered by Schools of Education often are designed to train prospective and practicing administrators. For those who want to teach at a community college, neither the discipline-based nor the educational doctorate is adequate. The George Mason University doctoral program is unique in that it directly addresses the special characteristics and needs of the community college instructor.

The Doctorate of Arts in Community College Teaching has four components. The first is discipline-based. Each graduate student must take at least 24 hours in his/her discipline. In this way, the community college teacher updates and advances competencies in a field of study. A second component is a series of core courses focusing on educational issues and skills relevant to community college teaching - critical thinking, adult education, writing across the curriculum, communication skills in the community college classroom. The third component is an internship experience. The doctoral candidate with limited teaching experience is given the opportunity to work or teach in a community college. The experienced community college teacher is encouraged to find an internship in an appropriate industry, association or government agency served by the community college. The fourth component of the Doctorate of Arts is a final graduate project or dissertation based on the doctoral student's teaching area or educational research interest.

The authors of this paper were hired by the Center for Community College Education to team-teach a course entitled "Communication Skills for the Community College Teacher." Because such a course had never been taught, the authors spent the summer of 1988 researching the topic and preparing the course objectives and syllabus. In addition to preparing for the course, the authors made an ancillary discovery: Basic research in community college teaching is often flawed because a significant portion of such research is based on erroneous assumptions regarding the mission of the community college and the role of its faculty. This finding emerged as the authors tried to answer questions regarding the objectives of their course.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The first step in preparing for the course was to consider whether there were basic and significant differences between the skills required for a community college lecture and those required at other kinds of institutions of higher learning.

Three basic research questions were asked, the answers to which would help the authors prepare to teach the course. The questions were as follows:

1. What are the skills required to present an effective lecture in the community college classroom?

2. Are those skills similar/different from those required in a four-year college or university?

3. Why are there similarities and/or differences in the skills required at different kinds of institutions of higher learning?

A similar set of three questions was asked regarding an instructor's ability to lead a class discussion and facilitate small group activities. The scope of this paper, however, will focus on the questions related to effective lecturing.

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the above questions, two avenues of investigation were followed. The first was an extensive Literature Search. The second was a Focus Group Interview. Each approach yielded a problem faced by researchers investigating questions related to community college teaching. In terms of the above questions, most of the research in community college

instruction has been conducted by four-year college researchers and/or is based on a four-year college model of education. Insufficient research is being conducted by community college faculty and researchers. The result is a body of knowledge which may not be applicable or appropriate for community college teaching.

1. Literature Search.

The topic of effective college lecturing has been addressed by several writers. The most popular sources in higher education have two liabilities. First, the perspectives of most writers are based on their experiences in four-year colleges. Second, the writers are Education professionals with no exposure to the field of Communication or Instructional Communication. Three of the "bibles" of college teaching illustrate the point. McKeachie's well-known and valuable Teaching Tips, Eble's The Craft of College Teaching, and Lowman's Mastering the Techniques of Teaching are excellent texts. For a new college teacher, there may be no better introduction to the art and craft of college instruction. The chapters and sections on lecturing, however, present simplistic formulas which include useful hints but lack the substance provided by the study of Communication. After having read these texts, a faculty member may be able to recite Eble's list of characteristics that separate good from bad lecturing (e.g. lack of introduction, fixed posture with attention fixed on notes, monotonous voice, etc.) but there is little content instructing the reader how to remedy these problems or how to construct an effective lecture. In addition, nothing in this literature distinguishes the needs of community college students from those enrolled at four-year colleges.

A second source of research on lecturing includes articles written within a faculty member's discipline. The authors found that, other than in English, there were very few sources designed to assist a faculty member lecture in his or her discipline. The assumption seems to be that lecturing is lecturing and what works in one kind of class will work in all. The experience of the community college graduate students was quite different. Through our students and their video taped lectures, we learned that effective lecturing techniques used by a calculus instructor are quite different from those used by a psychology or physical education instructor. None of the literature dealt with this issue and almost none of it applied, uniquely to community college teaching.

A third literature resource was the field of Communication. Here there were richer findings with articles and texts directly applicable to communication in the classroom. The problem was that the most writers directed their attention to secondary school teachers or to the broad category of college teaching. The writers in Communication were either unaware of or denying

the differences in teaching strategies for community college instruction. The problem is well illustrated in the authors' dilemma in choosing a text for the community college course. The most comprehensive and substantive text was Pamela Cooper's Speech Communication for the Classroom Teacher. This text, however, is designed for use by secondary school teachers. Because the authors did not want their students to assume the skills needed by community college teachers are identical to those required at the public school level, the text was used as a reference but not as a text. The chosen text was written by Communication professionals. We selected the Jossey-Bass monograph, Communicating in College Classrooms edited by Jean Civikly. The college classrooms in the monograph are, predictably, four-year college classrooms and the monograph is only a brief survey of communication variables to consider in the college classroom rather than specific instruction in communication skills. No chapter on lecturing was included.

The result of the literature search was a reliance on articles written in the field of Communication and Instructional Communication supplemented by more general articles from community college and four-year college literature. Given the lack of resources dealing with instructional communication in the community college, it could be argued that such materials are not needed given that the skills required in the community college classroom are no different than those required in any four-year college setting. This proposition had to be challenged if the course content was to be justified as unique to community college instruction.

2. Focus Group

With support from George Mason University's Center for Community College Education, the authors conducted a focus group interview at the 1988 Speech Communication Association Convention in New Orleans. The Focus Group participants were chosen to represent outstanding community college communication teachers from a variety of geographic areas as well as three four-year college representatives who had community college teaching experience and/or were experts in Instructional Communication. In total, ten participants contributed their opinions to the Focus Group.

The Focus Group facilitator asked the group to discussion three questions: (1) What is the purpose of a lecture, (2) Is the purpose different in a community college and (3) What are the important communication skills necessary for an effective lecture?

The results of the Focus Group were enlightening. At the beginning of the discussion, the group consensus was that there are no significant difference in the purpose of a lecture at the

community college and four-year college level other than that community college teachers may be better lecturers because teaching rather than research is their central focus. As the discussion progressed, however, a different perspective emerged. The function of the audience became the most significant variable in an effective lecture. The ability to adapt to the different community college audience was noted as the factor most responsible for the different approaches to lecturing. Despite the importance of this variable, the literature has not addressed the topic of adapting lecture material to the multi-cultural and highly diverse adult population in the community college.

There was general agreement that most M.A. programs in Communication do not serve future community college instructors. Participants also agreed that the diversity of characteristics, learning styles, abilities and motivations among community college student audiences requires special talents and adaptations in the lecture. By the end of the Focus Group, there was general agreement that the community college instructor faces a unique teaching situation and that little has been done to prepare them for that challenge.

CONCLUSIONS

The task of planning a new course is always a difficult one. In the case of "Communication Skills for the Community College Teacher" the task was particularly difficult given the lack of resources and the assumptions questioning the necessity for a such a specialized approach. The results of the Literature Search, the Focus Group and the experience of the course proved otherwise. For all of the enrolled students, most of whom were community college teachers, the course material was brand new. None had ever been taught how to lecture. None of the evaluation packages used in their colleges isolated the variables considered in the course. None had ever encountered topics such as Communication Apprehension, Audience Analysis, Rhetorical Strategies, Speech Organization and Support, Nonverbal Communication, Delivery and Adaptation to Feedback. Our reactions to the course and the reactions of our students led us to several conclusions.

1. There is a significant need for research in community college teaching and specifically in communication in the community college classroom.

2. Given the heavy teaching loads of community college teachers, partnerships should be encouraged and developed between four-year college researchers and community college faculty.

3. The field of Communication should elevate research in Instructional Communication and encourage research in the area of community college teaching.

4. Community colleges should make scholarship an integral part of the community college mission by linking it to teaching and rewarding research and scholarship by community college teachers.

The fields of Communication and Instructional Communication have a significant body of knowledge directly applicable to community college teaching. Community colleges, however, are not going to seek this knowledge because, for the most part, they are unaware of the resource. A partnership between Instructional Communication researchers and community college professionals is needed to tap this rich resource. Given the research priorities of the Universities and the teaching priorities of community colleges, a successful marriage of the two areas is long overdue.

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